

## The Historical Significance of the Whig Party: The Political Failure of the Age of Jackson

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As Daniel Walker Howe indicates, the second quarter of the nineteenth century has been called the "age of Jacksonian Democracy."<sup>1)</sup> This term, however, overshadows the existence of the Whig party—i.e., the strong opposition force against the Democrats in the second party system. Admittedly, the Whig party's short life of approximately twenty years has contributed to this depreciation of its significance. In addition, the sheer heterogeneity of the party's members, who included Southern states' righters, anti-masons, supporters of the Bank of the United States, Webster Federalists, and pro-Clay men, also diminished its historical importance. Indeed, Henry Adams even denounces the party, saying that "[o]f all parties that ever existed in the United States, the famous Whig party was the most feeble in ideas and the most blundering in management."<sup>2)</sup>

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1) Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979), 1.

In spite of such underestimation, it is nevertheless impossible to deny the role of the Whig party in defining the Jacksonian age. Even Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a devotee of Jacksonian Democracy, explains in detail the considerable influence of the Whig party on the age, although negatively. If so, what is the significance of the Whig party in the Jacksonian age? That is, what kind of role did it play in forming the era of Jackson? How did it come into being and why did it fall apart so quickly? This paper will examine the significance of the Whig party by answering the aforesaid questions, for answers to them will illuminate crucial aspects of the age of Jackson such as the rapid proliferation of popular democracy, extreme capitalist development, and omens of the impending Civil War. In order to do so, I will first explore the historiography of the Whigs, then attempt to reconstruct the historical significance of the party on the basis of the already explored historiography, and finally try to understand the political limitations of the Jacksonian age through its early demise.

Historians show no consensus regarding the definition of the Whig party. First, Schlesinger understands the Whig party as a post-Jacksonian Federalist party. According to him, Federalist conservatism was reborn in the Jacksonian age as the Whigs. He says, "Federalism and Whiggery represented the same interests in society, the same aspirations for power, [and] the same essential economic policies"; the only difference between them is that Federalism expressed its predilection for aristocratic supremacy with "candor", whereas Whiggery did so with "evasion."<sup>3</sup>) In addition, Schlesinger explains that the victory of the Whig candidate

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2) Henry Adams, *The Life of Albert Gallatin* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1880), 635.

3) Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1945), 279.

William Henry Harrison over Martin Van Buren in the 1840 presidential election occurred because voters were "seduced by the Jacksonian emotions"<sup>4)</sup>; that is, the Whig party won over voters with Democratic and Jeffersonian language, whereas it actually served the business community, with its ulterior Hamiltonianism. For Schlesinger, the Whig victory in the 1840 presidential election therefore turns out, paradoxically, to be the "most conclusive evidence of the triumph of Jackson" because Whig conservatism "assume[d] the manner of the [Democratic] party."<sup>5)</sup> Overall, Schlesinger's concept of Jacksonian Democracy signifies Eastern workers' radicalism and the Democratic party's responsiveness to their demands; he accordingly defines the Whigs as serving Eastern aristocratic capitalism that oppressed the urban working class.

In contrast, Lee Benson criticizes such a definition of Jacksonian Democracy. Benson's basic contention is that neither the Democratic party nor the Whig party "advocated the Federalist ideal of a highly centralized economic system, tightly controlled, administered, and operated by a relatively small elite group."<sup>6)</sup> He also opposes Schlesinger's argument that the Whigs were the "champions of inequality."<sup>7)</sup> On the contrary, for Benson, the Democratic and the Whig parties alike were "committed to equal rights and antimonopoly"; in other words, in a manner similar to that of the Democrats who advocated equality, the Whigs "advocated a free government... whose function was to create the conditions necessary to 'equalize the conditions of men.'"<sup>8)</sup> Benson's

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4) Ibid.

5) Ibid., 305.

6) Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1961), 105.

7) Ibid., 305.

8) Ibid., 105, 244.

book, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, consequently endeavors to demonstrate that both parties' leadership and mass support came from the same socioeconomic groups and that the voting behavior of the Jacksonian era simply followed ethnocultural and religious factors, not class lines. After thus attempting to refute Schlesinger, Benson finally valorizes the Whigs over the Democrats by contending as follows: the Democratic party, which anachronistically maintained idealistic agrarianism, "uncompromisingly opposed political programs that required the state to act positively to foster democratic egalitarianism, economic democracy, social and humanitarian reform", whereas the Whig party strenuously encouraged national economic growth and moral improvement, with a view to establishing the economic foundation for the nation's democracy.<sup>9)</sup>

In a way similar to that of Benson, Edward Pessen, too, says that the voters and the leadership of both parties exhibited no clear-cut class difference. In his view, the two parties shared "similarities in theory, practice, and the social composition of their constituencies."<sup>10)</sup> The only difference between them, Pessen argues, was the Whigs' "slightly greater predilection toward wealth."<sup>11)</sup> However, he maintains that this "hardly sustains the Jacksonians' own notion that theirs was the party of the common people,"<sup>12)</sup> for, according to him, the Whigs were not indifferent to small farmers' interests in spite of their pro-business spirit.<sup>13)</sup> More precisely, unlike the Whigs, who candidly

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9) Ibid., 332.

10) Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1985), 258.

11) Ibid.

12) Ibid.

13) Ibid., 219.

promoted capitalism, the Democrats "capitalized most astutely [or disingenuously] the antiaristocratic implications in their leader's traits", Pessen adds.<sup>14)</sup> He therefore concludes that the Democrats' words "[c]ommon people" were no more than a demagogic and partisan slogan.<sup>15)</sup>

Even though Pessen thus refers to slight differences between the two parties, he finally sees both as essentially the same: "vote-getting machines."<sup>16)</sup> According to him, the United States' modern political system was established in the Jacksonian age and was dominated by "pragmatic parties which placed electoral success above principle."<sup>17)</sup> Due to this pragmatic character as vote-getting machines, the two parties "dealt with the great issues [of the time] not by meeting them squarely but by indirection" through their "rhetorical excesses of demagogues."<sup>18)</sup> Pessen therefore concludes: neither was the second party system genuinely democratic, nor was the age exactly that of the "common man."<sup>19)</sup>

Another historian who pays attention to the aspect of the parties as "electoral machines" is Richard P. McCormick. Like Pessen, he<sup>20)</sup> does not think that the true significance of the parties lies in any ideological or doctrinal issue. Instead, he argues that the existence of the second party system is mainly indebted to the "successive contests for the presidency between 1824 and 1840."<sup>21)</sup> According to him, the

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14) Ibid., 259.

15) Ibid.

16) Ibid., 260.

17) Ibid., 326.

18) Ibid.

19) Ibid., 324.

20) For the sake of convenience, "McCormick" will hereafter designate Richard P. McCormick, not Richard L. McCormick. When I mention the latter, I will use his full name.

"national" characteristic of American politics first emerged as a result of the adoption of the United States Constitution: the provisions for electing the President in the Constitution gave politics a "national" scope, and the "House of Representatives elected from the states by popular vote", as specified in the Constitution, worked to "relate state politics to national politics."<sup>22)</sup> Such national elements in early American politics led to the creation of the first party system. Then in a manner dissimilar to that of its predecessor, the second party system of the United States resulted, first, from the successive contests for the presidential elections and, second, from a new constitutional and legal environment created by diverse elements of popular democracy: popular selection of presidential electors, not legislative choice as in the first party system; single member districts; printed ballots; reduction of polling units; and elimination of suffrage restrictions.<sup>23)</sup> In addition, the decline of gentry control, considerable improvement in the "means of communication and transportation", and the expansion of the Union accelerated the formation of "mass parties" during this period.<sup>24)</sup> In particular, the adoption of the national convention system rather than the caucus, dramatic campaign styles, the "elaborate party apparatus" and management, and the "close balance of the parties" decisively contributed to an unprecedented increase in voter turnouts.<sup>25)</sup> All such political changes in the age remarkably amplified the popular and national tone of politics, consequently creating a truly national two-

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21) Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1966), 13.

22) *Ibid.*, 20.

23) *Ibid.*, 344.

24) *Ibid.*, 345.

25) *Ibid.*, 350.

party system in virtually every state of the Union for the first time in American history. The Whigs and the Democrats were the two national parties that competed against each other as vote-getting machines in this newly formed party system.

In this way, McCormick's frame of reference for the party politics of the Jacksonian age does not much consider doctrinal disputes between the Whigs and the Democrats but primarily concentrates on the parties' institutional aspects as presidential electoral machines in the second party system. For him, the major significance of the Whig party lies in the fact that it adduced the obvious evidence of the full-blown two-party system such as the log cabin campaign of the Whig presidential candidate William Henry Harrison and the consequent unprecedented voter turnouts in the 1840 election.

Sean Wilentz does not so much pay attention to the institutional aspects of the party system as McCormick does. However, like the latter, the former, too, concentrates on both parties' similarity resulting from their institutional limitations: the two parties' anti-ideological character. Ironically, however, Wilentz agrees with the argument that the "anti-ideological party system was an act of profound social and ideological importance."<sup>26</sup> That is, according to him, the two anti-ideological parties betrayed a specific ideological tendency that could be called republican liberalism: they hid their own "liberal" identities by speaking in "egalitarian republican language."<sup>27</sup> He argues that both parties' republican appeal was merely a way of mass politicking, Jackson's Bank veto message being

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26) Sean Wilentz, "On Class and Politics in Jacksonian America", *Reviews in American History* 10,4 (1982): 55.

27) *Ibid.*, 57.

a case in point. After thus examining the ideological similarity of the two parties—i.e., republican liberalism—Wilentz conclusively says, “while both Whigs and Democrats were liberal parties led by different members of new and existing elites, the Whigs tended to draw their popular support chiefly from men who believed that they... benefited from the ongoing transformations of American market and class relations. The Democrats tended to appeal to those who did not.”<sup>28)</sup> In this way, he understands both parties as slightly different factions belonging to the same ruling class based on the same ruling ideology of republican liberalism.

Similarly to Wilentz, Glyndon G. Van Deusen argues that both the Democrats and the Whigs were “oriented... around a middle class norm” and that the “political conflicts of the Jacksonian period were fought more often with a view to gaining control of the government than out of devotion to diametrically opposed political and social ideals.”<sup>29)</sup> He also agrees with Benson that the composition of the parties had little to do with class lines. For Deusen, the difference between the two parties lay solely in their means, rather than in their aims.

In contrast to the historians who have been hitherto discussed, John Ashworth focuses on the function of the parties as vehicles for ideology. He strongly argues that the second party system was an institutional expression of “ideological divisions.”<sup>30)</sup> He consequently opposes McCormick, arguing that the parties were “something more than electoral machines.”<sup>31)</sup> In addition, he is against Benson’s ethnocultural

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28) Ibid., 58.

29) Glyndon G. Van Deusen, “Some Aspects of Whig Thought and Theory in the Jacksonian Period”, *American Historical Review* 63.2 (1958): 321, 322.

30) John Ashworth, *‘Agrarians’ & ‘Aristocrats’: Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837–1846* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 266.



view; according to Ashworth, ethnocultural questions should be replaced by ideological questions regarding the two parties because ethnocultural issues such as "immigrant voting, political partisanship, religion, and morality in politics" can be most clearly explained by the ideological divisions between the conservative capitalism of the Whigs and the radical egalitarian democracy of the Democrats.<sup>32)</sup> In this sense, he defines the Jacksonian age as a period that featured the ideological conflict between capitalism and democracy; the two parties—the Whigs and the Democrats—respectively incarnated and "presented to the electorate [these] two coherent ideologies and two internally consistent sets of policies"<sup>33)</sup>; voters' ideological loyalty to each party was the "major determinant" of the voting behavior of the time, he maintains.<sup>34)</sup> Ashworth further refers to the enduring historical significance of such ideological divisions between the two parties: they "had their origins deep in the American past" and still persisted even after the second party system's collapse.<sup>35)</sup>

Like Ashworth, Michael F. Holt, too, opposes both ethnoculturalists' and McCormick's views. He does so because both ignore the importance of economic issues in early nineteenth-century political development. According to Holt, ethnoculturalists do not consider the "results of elections—for who won and who lost—and how the pattern of party victory fluctuated over time."<sup>36)</sup> In contradiction to ethnoculturalists'

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31) Ibid., 262.

32) Ibid., 220.

33) Ibid., 269.

34) Ibid., 259.

35) Ibid., 266.

36) Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development: From the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1992), 161.

contention, Holt closely examines the correlation between the Whigs' fortune and the economic fluctuation in the Jacksonian age and concludes that the most influential factor determining contemporary voting behavior was economic conditions and policies rather than voters' ethnic and religious differences. In addition, he claims that McCormick's mechanical viewpoint fails to explain why the Whigs, not the Democrats, "captured three-fifths of the 900,000 new voters mobilized between 1836 and 1840."<sup>37)</sup> According to Holt, because McCormick concentrates only on the presidential elections, not on the local and state elections, the latter cannot precisely explain the causes of "the unprecedented voter turnout", the "lasting voter allegiances", and the coalition-building that finally led to the 1840 Whig victory.<sup>38)</sup>

As suggested here, even though Holt does not explicitly emphasize the ideological aspects of the Whig party as Ashworth does, the former also explains the destiny of the Whigs in terms of their ideology. That is, in a way similar to that of Ashworth, he offers the following explanations: the rise of the Whig party began with its ideological devotion to the republican principle of self-government and its attack against executive tyranny<sup>39)</sup>; the consolidation of the Whigs in the second party system was thanks to their ideological attitude to the economic vicissitudes that occurred after the Panic of 1837.

As has been examined so far, historians' views on the Whig party are extremely diverse. In spite of such a lack of consensus, however, we can observe a convergent pattern, particularly in terms of the Whigs'

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37) Ibid., 158.

38) Ibid.

39) Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), viii.

ideology. Granted, McCormick's focus on the institutional aspects of the party system is an essentially valid approach to the Whig party. However, it is also undeniable that the Whigs' rhetoric and policies took on distinct and consistent ideological tones. We will therefore attempt to reconstruct and assess the significance of the Whig party through a close examination of its consistent ideological patterns in conjunction with its institutional aspects on the basis of the already examined Whig historiography.

In fact, the ideological origin of the Whig party is traced to the Jeffersonian age. That is, the "moderate Jeffersonians", who took the lead of economic developmental programs regarding tariffs, internal improvement, and banks, can be said to be the direct origin of the Whigs.<sup>40)</sup> Whereas "business enterprise and democracy" had been thought to be "incompatible" during the Revolutionary days, the optimistic Jeffersonian synthesis of republican nationalism regarded the "old dichotomies of the Revolution" as compatible; as a result of this ideological consensus, the moderate Jeffersonians—or republican nationalists—were able vigorously to promote national economic programs under its democratic slogans.<sup>41)</sup> The theoretical foundation of the Whigs' partisan rhetoric came directly from this ideological synthesis achieved by the moderate Jeffersonians and their consequent, enthusiastic efforts to implement national economic plans.

However, when America began to develop its national economy thanks to the Jeffersonian consensus, it was soon entangled in the capitalistic boom-and-bust cycle. The Panics of 1819 and of 1837 are representative examples of the "bust." These two bust periods not only broke the

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40) Richard E. Ellis, qtd. in Ashworth, *'Agrarians' & 'Aristocrats'*, 135.

41) *Ibid.*

"moderate Jeffersonian synthesis" but also decisively led the "resulting ideological rupture" to materialize into a full-blown national two-party system in the 1830s.<sup>42)</sup> In other words, the two panics split the national consensus of republican nationalism into the following two ideologically disparate national parties: the Democrats, who obstinately maintained agrarian equalitarianism, and the Whigs, who upheld entrepreneurial capitalism.

Indeed, the series of Democratic economic programs—e.g., the veto of the recharter of the Second Bank of the United States, the pet bank system, the Specie Circular, the Independent Treasury, and their opposition to paper currency, banks, and corporations—shows how persistently the Democrats adhered to their own ideology of egalitarian agrarian democracy. Thus strongly convinced of the righteousness of their ideology, the Democrats fiercely opposed the Whigs' capitalistic developmental agenda for the reason that it would lead to social inequalities and special privileges. The Democrats, for example, condemned the national bank as a tool to widen the gap between rich and poor. In addition, through the "Independent Treasury", they attempted to deprive the federal government of the power to regulate the national currency, thus proclaiming once again their ideological inclination toward the democratic principle of small government.<sup>43)</sup>

In contrast, according to the basic tenets of the Whigs' ideology, national prosperity was a necessary condition for the enjoyment of equality and democracy. Based on this ideological ground, the Whigs supported the business class and governmental economic programs. On behalf of the business class, they argued for the value of corporations

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42) Ashworth, *'Agrarians' & 'Aristocrats'*, 136.

43) Deussen, "Some Aspects of Whig Thought", 315.

and paper currency. In particular, they wanted the federal government to regulate and stabilize the currency and credit system through a national bank, thereby developing the national economy more effectively. The Whigs thus defined the federal government as an "active agency in promoting the welfare of the nation", which was a "cardinal principle of Whig Thought."<sup>44</sup> This is also why they fervently advocated the national economic plan of the American System consisting of internal improvement, the protective tariff, and a national bank. In addition, the Whigs regarded state governments as "proper agencies for promoting the welfare of society."<sup>45</sup> In this way, the Whigs endeavored to develop the nation's modern capitalist economy by various means.

While the Whigs' aim was thus capitalistic and "nationalistic in character", originating from both the moderate Jeffersonians' capitalism and John Quincy Adams's "nationalist" economic vision, this party's campaign rhetoric simultaneously emphasized the political—specifically, democratic and egalitarian—significance of its national economic plans.<sup>46</sup> Henry Clay stated that the national economic plan of the American System would bring a "shower of blessings upon all parts of the Union."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Daniel Webster proclaimed that the Whigs intended to "increase the stake of the ordinary citizen and so to promote the harmony and strength of the Union."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, according to the Whigs' view of history, the Revolution, the Articles of the Confederation, and the Constitution all resulted from Americans' efforts to protect national industries and economy—and thereby liberty.

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44) *Ibid.*, 317.

45) *Ibid.*, 315.

46) *Ibid.*, 317.

47) *Ibid.*, 318.

48) *Ibid.*

However, despite the Whigs' contention that their vigorous pursuit of national economic plans would eventually promote both democracy and equality, they were "unable to enthuse about democracy" as much as the Democrats did.<sup>49)</sup> In fact, the Whigs' aristocratic republicanism feared possible harm from democracy. As Deussen indicates, the Whigs did not accept the "universal manhood suffrage" "enthusiastic[ally]" although they could not oppose it in a straightforward way.<sup>50)</sup>

Such aristocratic conservatism on the Whigs' part led to their reservations about radical political democracy and to their defense of the existing order. For example, as Ashworth indicates, the Whigs supported the judiciary as the "[defender] of the Constitution", whereas the Democrats assaulted it as the "last refuge of those unreconstructed conservatives who resented or despised democracy."<sup>51)</sup> Likewise, while the Democrats' egalitarian democracy promoted territorial expansion as America's "Manifest Destiny", the Whigs were against it for fear that excessive westward expansion would destroy the existing "republican" order.<sup>52)</sup> For the same reason, the latter opposed the former's land policies of "pre-emption", "graduation", cheap land, and protection for "squatters."<sup>53)</sup> The Whigs thus wished their eastern capitalistic order to be threatened by no means. The Whig party's legislative Address of May 1844 succinctly demonstrates its ideological orientation toward conservatism:

The Whig party derives its principles from the Revolution . . . It

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49) Ashworth, *'Agrarians' & 'Aristocrats'*, 83.

50) Deussen, "Some Aspects of Whig Thought", 309.

51) Ashworth, *'Agrarians' & 'Aristocrats'*, 74, 35.

52) *Ibid.*, 75.

53) *Ibid.*, 76, 77.

promotes public wealth and happiness by protecting personal industry and by developing those resources with which God has blessed the American States. It seeks improvement but dreads innovation. It works out reforms but adheres to existing institutions and submits to existing laws until they can be peacefully and constitutionally changed. It is devoted to progress but does not destroy. It seeks to establish the perfect equality of political rights; but it levels upwards not downwards by education and benignant legislation, not by subverting established laws or institutions. It is the party of the Law, of Order, of Enterprise, of Improvement, of Beneficence, of Hope and humanity.<sup>54)</sup>

As revealed here, the Whig party pursued gradual change as its official policy in order to protect the existing order.

However, the Jacksonian age was a period that underwent a drastically democratic social change. As McCormick indicates, this was the era that created a remarkably popular constitutional and legal environment. The republican gentry's conservatism that the Whigs incarnated therefore proved incompatible with the newly emerging social atmosphere. Consequently, in order to survive this sweeping social change towards popular democracy, the aristocratic and conservative Whigs were forced to cater to mass psychology for the purpose of mobilizing mass support from voters. The Whigs' log cabin campaigns and dramatic mass rallies were the outcome.

Furthermore, in this intensifying democratic social atmosphere, electoral competition between the Whigs and the Democrats became increasingly fierce, which finally transformed the two parties into mass-politicking machines. As a result of such transformation, the two parties' respective ideological principles became "never hard and fast",

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54) Qtd. in Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 250-51.

as Richard L. McCormick contends.<sup>55)</sup> Indeed, as Charles Sellers argues, in their blind pursuit of electoral victory, the Whigs came to mimic the Democrats' democratic rhetoric, and the Democrats eventually neutralized their radically democratic doctrine with capitalism.<sup>56)</sup> In a word, both parties' ideological differences became capitalistically neutralized and consequently almost indistinguishable. For this reason, many historians, particularly McCormick, argue that the attempt to differentiate the two parties' ideologies is meaningless.

However, voter mobilization for the Whig party between 1836 and 1840 cannot be explained solely in terms of contemporary mass politicking. Rather, as Holt mainly argues, it would be more tenable to say that the *economic* event of the Panic of 1837 made voters more inclined to the Whigs' doctrinal agenda of an interventionist and active government, which subsequently resulted in the Whig presidential candidate William Harrison's victory in the 1840 election. Indeed, according to Holt, the Whig party flourished whenever a depression set in<sup>57)</sup>; every depression—particularly the Panic of 1837—made secure the Whigs' position as a valid anti-Democratic party in the two-party system. In this way, the Whigs' ideology of nationalistic capitalism was arguably a major factor that caused the party to succeed in the two presidential elections and to be evenly matched with the Democrats in local and state elections.

Thus, the Whigs' political success can be largely attributed to its

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55) Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 165.

56) Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 348.

57) Holt, *Political Parties*, 186–87.



doctrine—i.e., nationalistic developmental capitalism that originated from the moderate Jeffersonians' synthesis. Such ideological significance of the party, which became tangible through the nation's experience of contemporary economic crises and debates, could not be faded out by the mass politicking policies of two-party democracy, as Holt adequately refutes McCormick.<sup>58)</sup> Rather, it was unquestionably the crucial driving force that enabled the extremely heterogeneous Whigs to cohere and finally to emerge as a truly *national* major party in the second party system.

Ironically, however, the very "national" and "nationalistic" economic appeal of the party simultaneously turned out to be one of the major reasons for the fall of the Whigs. That is, as soon as the Whigs' national economic agenda became no longer persuasive to voters, the party began to collapse. In fact, according to McCormick, the two parties in the second party system were "artificial" in character because these *national* parties had been "initially shaped by strongly sectionalized attitudes toward particular candidates."<sup>59)</sup> That is, in spite of the innate "real sectional antagonisms", the two parties sought artificially to keep their organization national by evading "[explicitly] sectional issues", such as "territorial expansion and slavery", intentionally.<sup>60)</sup> Accordingly, when the sectional issues came to the fore and became no longer avoidable, these artificially structured national parties significantly faltered, which finally led to the demise of the second party system.

Richard L. McCormick similarly explains the artificially national

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58) Ibid., 157–58.

59) McCormick, *The Second American Party System*, 353.

60) Ibid.

character of the two parties. According to him, both parties had a "curious and complex relationship with the sectionally divisive slavery issue."<sup>61</sup> In other words, whereas, at the national level, they endeavored to compromise or avoid altogether the issue of slavery for protection of their party unity, at the sectional level, the two parties even "profited" from this "divisive" issue by using it as "grist for partisan mills" and "opportunities to reinforce partisanship by defending alternative positions."<sup>62</sup> In this manner, the two national parties exploited the sectional issues of slavery and territorial expansion opportunistically and even dangerously, thereby significantly exacerbating sectional conflicts.

Finally, as Holt indicates, the Whigs'-and the Democrats'-artificial and precarious relationship with the slavery issue was forced to an end when the Compromise of 1850 became both parties' final decision on it.<sup>63</sup> The Compromise of 1850 contained two nation-splitting elements such as popular sovereignty, which allowed territories to decide for themselves whether to enter the Union as free or slave states, and the Fugitive Slave Law, which forced even Northerners to hunt slaves. As a result, this compromise irrevocably sectionalized the nation and accordingly deprived the parties of their ability to survive the sectional strife by campaigning differently in each section of the North and the South.<sup>64</sup> Immediately after the Compromise, the Democrats were consequently split into two-i.e., Northern Democrats and Southern proslavery Democrats-and the Whig party's original nationalistic slogans such as the "Union" and "internal improvement as a means of binding the Union together" came to ring hollow in voters' ears. Voters then

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61) Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy*, 167.

62) Ibid.

63) Holt, *Political Parties*, 244.

64) Ibid.

began to demand realistic—i.e., “highly sectionalized”—parties rather than a titular national party that would deceptively envision “national” prosperity in the face of the sectionally divided country.<sup>65)</sup> The end of the Whig party thus became imminent.

In addition to this, as Holt indicates, the sudden economic boom resulting from the “California gold strikes” and “massive British investment” made the Whig party’s national economic appeal—its interventionist government agenda—sound anachronistic.<sup>66)</sup> Consequently, the party’s original significance as the promoter of nationalistic developmental economic programs became obsolete.<sup>67)</sup>

Most importantly, in the 1850s, newly emerging sectional parties began to define themselves as major alternatives to the Democrats, thereby depriving the Whigs of their original identity as a valid opposition party in the two-party system.<sup>68)</sup> Its partisan identity thus lost, the Whig party finally collapsed, thereby putting an end to the second party system of the United States. The remaining Whigs, then already split along sectional lines, joined purely sectional parties: the Free Soil party and the Republican party, which represented the interests only of the North, not of the entire nation, or the Democratic party, which was now reborn as a sectional party espousing Southern proslavery sentiments.

To recapitulate the entire process of birth, life, and demise of the Whigs, first, their party organization was originally initiated as a “national republican advocat[e] of the virtues of the American System.”<sup>69)</sup>

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65) McCormick, *The Second American Party System*, 353.

66) Holt, *Political Parties*, 245.

67) Ibid.

68) Ibid., 247.

69) Richard E. Ellis, “The Market Revolution and the Transformation of

That is, having their ideological origin in the moderate Jeffersonian synthesis of democracy and capitalism, the Whigs emerged as the champion of both republican—or aristocratic—conservatism and nationalistic capitalism. Under such ideological principles, they promoted national economic plans and an active government role in economy. Thus differentiating themselves ideologically from the Democrats, the Whigs grew as a major opponent to Jacksonian Democracy, thereby consummating the second party system. Admittedly, the two-party system in itself blurred the ideological differences between the two parties, as Richard L. McCormick indicates.<sup>70</sup> Undeniably, however, the Whigs' ideological orientation toward national capitalism and their consequent promotion of national economic plans served as major grounds on which voters decided their allegiance to the party. In this way, the second party system crystallized mainly thanks to the two parties' ideological differences.

Nevertheless, the stability of the second party system was merely "superficial", as suggested by its short duration.<sup>71</sup> Granted, the Whig party was so successful as to win the 1840 and 1848 presidential elections and many local and state elections. It thereby led the second party system to prosperity. However, such evidence of the prosperity of the national party system was actually indebted to both parties' evasive attitude to the fundamental sectional issue of slavery. That is, as McCormick, Holt, and Richard L. McCormick argue, in order to maintain their respective identities and structures as national parties, both the Whigs and the Democrats skirted around the sectionally

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American Politics, 1801–1837", *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1996), 172.

70) Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy*, 166.

71) Ellis, "The Market Revolution", 172.

critical issue on the national level while catering to each different sectional interest in local elections. Wilentz comments on this evasive attitude of the two parties, arguing that their official—or national—rhetoric complacently repeated the old “egalitarian republican language” of the American Revolution and therefore failed effectively to tackle the diverging sectional interests and the growing gap among the classes, both of which the Market Revolution and territorial expansion intensified.<sup>72)</sup> According to Wilentz, the two parties in the second party system simply “deflected and coopted new social conflicts [particularly over slavery]... [only interested in] keeping politics safe for the politicians and expanding their followings.”<sup>73)</sup>

In this way, evasiveness, compromises, and opportunism were key operative terms epitomizing the two national parties’ attitude to the critical contemporary issue of slavery. Due to such an attitude, both parties failed to be responsive to the impending national calamity of disunion. For this reason, when evasiveness or compromise on the slavery issue was no longer allowed in federal politics following the Compromise of 1850, voters began to switch their allegiance to explicitly sectional parties, thereby disintegrating the two national parties decisively. As a result, the Whig party collapsed, the fall of the second party system ensued, and sectionalism finally prevailed in the Union, thus expediting disunion.

Because the second party system was a political structure that characterized the Jacksonian age, the demise of the Whigs and the consequent collapse of the second party system can be said to be typical indicators of the limitations of Jacksonian democracy. More specifically, both parties in the national party system only reproduced

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72) Wilentz, “On Class and Politics in Jacksonian America”, 57.

73) Ibid.

the nation's inveterate contradiction—i.e., liberty based on slavery—without making effective or consistent efforts to reform it. In fact, the national contradiction of slavery originated from the colonial days, intensified during the American Revolution, and was institutionally secured through the ratification of the United States Constitution. In this way, slavery had been a capitalistically, institutionally, and historically deeprooted evil of American society. When this evil was handed down to the Jacksonian age, politicians in the two parties in the second party system merely indulged in a status quo constituted on it, simply pandering to voters with republican rhetoric or popular campaign slogans and consequently failing to penetrate the ominous reality in which the Market Revolution and excessive territorial expansion had developed the social contradiction of slavery into a formidable national threat beyond any compromise.

In this sense, the Whig victories in the presidential and local elections can be said to have provided no fundamental breakthrough for this problematic age. Granted, as Holt argues, thanks to their ideological doctrine of national economic plans, the Whigs successfully obtained voters' allegiance whenever a depression set in. However, the Whigs' policies were indisputably no more than insignificant makeshifts in the situation of the looming disruption of the country by the two extremely severe capitalistic social changes—i.e., the Market Revolution and territorial expansion.

In this politically abortive circumstance of the second party system, the function of a party as a "means of transforming principles into legislation, rhetoric into reality" was practically impossible.<sup>74)</sup> As a result, the two parties in the second party system literally deteriorated into

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74) Ashworth, *'Agrarians' & 'Aristocrats'*, 260.

mere electoral machines, as McCormick indicates. Finally, the parties' superficial roles as electoral machines did not last long and soon incurred the demise of the second party system, thus overtly demonstrating the political failure of the Jacksonian age.

Taking into consideration such fundamental limitations inherent in the era of Jackson, it would be improper to criticize only the Whigs as the "most feeble [party] in ideas", as Henry Adams did.<sup>75)</sup> Rather, such criticism should be directed at both parties in the second party system because they alike failed to resolve the national contradiction bequeathed since the Revolution. Indeed, both the Democrats' hard money economic policies and the Whigs' American System were merely skirting around the true concern in the sectional crisis—i.e., slavery.

Eventually, such political limitations of Jacksonian democracy, which are evidenced by the short duration of the Whig party and the early demise of the second party system, functioned as one crucial step toward to the Civil War. The Civil War was a violent explosion of the deeply entrenched national contradiction of slavery. The demise of the Whig party over this contradiction indicated that no more evasion or compromise on it was possible, unlike in previous generations ranging from the Revolution through the adoption of the Constitution to early Jacksonian democracy. Rather, in order to resolve it, the nation came to demand direct sectional clashes resorting to violence and blood. Thus, due to its failure to come to terms with the nation's irrevocable sectionalization—i.e., the threatening social consequence of the Market Revolution and territorial expansion—Jacksonian politics was finally swept up in the violent and bloody disruption of the Union.

As has been examined thus far, the short-lived Whig party represented

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75) Adams, *The Life of Albert Gallatin*, 635.

the new republic's promise, contradiction, and crisis, all of which coexisted at the critical juncture of antebellum America, intensely and phantasmagorically. That is, first, in spite of their aristocratic and republican tendency, the Whigs, through their fierce electoral competition with the Democrats, significantly contributed to the establishment of various popular and democratic political institutions of the United States including the second party system, campaign slogans, national nominating conventions, and mass voter turnouts. Second, whereas the Whigs' will to implement national economic plans served to advance a nationwide capitalist economy, their complacent attitude to the moral and economic issue of slavery made them overlook the intimidating speed of the nation's capitalistic growth resulting from the Market Revolution and territorial expansion. Consequently, they foundered on the serious byproduct of excessive capitalism: the Union sectionally divided, particularly over slavery. Thus caught in the diverse socioeconomic contradictions embedded in antebellum America, the Whig party—and, simultaneously, the second party system's incessant efforts to compromise, evade, or exploit sectionalism—collapsed. The demise of the Whigs then catalyzed the sectional conflicts, becoming a direct factor leading to the Civil War. In this manner, in its way to demise, the Whig party vividly represented the one major failure of the age of Jackson: its complacent adherence to the ingrained national inconsistency—i.e., freedom resting on the political and capitalist exploitation of slaves.



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## Abstract

# **The Historical Significance of the Whig Party: The Political Failure of the Age of Jackson**

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This paper is an attempt to reconstruct the historical significance of the Whigs by examining Whig historiography and eventually to illuminate the political failure of the Jacksonian age through the party's early demise. Originating from the moderate Jeffersonian synthesis of democracy and capitalism, the Whig party emerged as the champion of both republican-or aristocratic-conservatism and nationalistic capitalism. Despite their relatively aristocratic ideological predilection, however, the Whigs, through their fierce electoral competition with the Democrats, significantly contributed to the establishment of popular democracy, as revealed by the emergence of various political institutions during the Jacksonian age, including the second party system, campaign slogans, national nominating conventions, and mass voter turnouts. In addition, the Whigs' ideological adherence to national capitalism or national economic plans served as a major reason for them to win popular allegiance whenever a depression set in.

However, the Whigs and the Democrats, the two national parties constituting the second party system, complacently adhered to a status quo founded on the Union's inveterate contradiction-i.e., liberty based on slavery-in order to maintain their national structure. They accordingly continued to respond to the critical national issue of slavery with evasiveness and compromises. As a result, when evasiveness and compromises on slavery were no longer allowed in federal politics following the Compromise of 1850, in other words, when the intimidating speed of the nation's capitalistic growth resulting from the crucial social changes of the era-i.e., the Market Revolution and territorial expansion-drove the

sectional conflicts over slavery beyond any constitutional control, the two national parties failed to come to terms with this national crisis. Consequently, voters switched their allegiance to highly sectional parties: the Whig party subsequently collapsed; the fall of the second party system ensued; and sectionalism finally prevailed in the Union, thus expediting disunion. In this way, through its early demise, the Whig party registered the political limitations of the Jacksonian era: its complacent adherence to an ingrained national inconsistency—i.e., freedom resting on the political and capitalist exploitation of slaves—and its consequent failure to tackle the nation's irrevocable sectionalization caused by the Market Revolution and territorial expansion.

**Key Words**

Whig Party, Democratic Party, Second Party System, Age of Jackson, Slavery, Popular Democracy, Capitalism